Civic Engagement in Australian Democracy, Edited by Sarah Murray and Lachlan Umbers, 2025, Anthem Press, London and NY, pp 234 RRP AUD 110, ISBN: 9781839993534 (Hbk).

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As an academic whose scholarship, public policy contributions and legal advocacy has revolved around principles of active citizenship, reviewing this collection of essays about civic engagement in Australian democracy is very satisfying. I do so, having recently finished *Eleven Writers and Leaders on Democracy – What it is and why it matters*[1] released in 2024, during a year in which that book notes, over half the world's population exercised the right to vote in dozens of states. As that book identifies, the ability to vote is not necessarily a marker of a true democracy, and faith in democracy requires faith in institutions, the rule of law, and institutional frameworks protecting the rights of citizens.

It is a commitment to this broader conception of democracy that underpins Lachlan Umbers and Sarah Murray's edited collection of twelve chapters, involving 26 authors, that evolved from a workshop at the University of Western Australia's Institute for Advances Studies flowing from the research project 'Seeking to Strengthen Australian Democracy'.

The introduction to this collection opens with the affirming statement '[f]ew would deny the importance of an active citizenry in a democracy' but they too acknowledge that active citizenship is larger than voting. They identify '[o]rganising campaigns, attending demonstrations, petitioning government, knocking on doors and so on' as further expressions of 'rule by the people' – although who 'the people' are, is a contested and ongoing question for many democracies.[2]

[1] Margaret Atwood, Mary Beard, Erica Benner. *Democracy: Eleven writers and leaders on what it is – and why it matters.* London, Profile Books, 2024. The eleven writers are all women and include Margaret Atwood, Mary Beard, Lea Ypi, Elif Shafak and others.

[2] I engage with these issues in Kim Rubenstein, 'When a state seeks to deport non-citizens, who are its citizens? Determining membership in the twenty-first century.' *Griffith Law Review*, 2025 pp. 1-9.

While relevant to all democracies in its themes and concerns, and the editors acknowledge their preparation of the book occurred while democracy is under pressure around the globe, the book is focussed on Australian democracy. Indeed, recent events in Australia provide rich content for examining Australians participation in the democratic process and how that has changed and continues to change.

Moreover, in the last ten years the editors recognise there have been two significant opportunities 'to participate directly in the law-making process'. One was politically motivated, as the government chose to initiate a postal survey identifying the public's views of same-sex marriage in the 2017 plebiscite. Then there was the constitutionally proscribed vote, itself a reflection of the founders of the Australian constitution's commitment to active citizenship. Section 128 of the *Australian Constitution* mandates voters' involvement in any constitutional alteration, required in 2023 when the government responded to the Uluru statement of the Heart, a process itself of active citizenship[3], resulting in an unsuccessful referendum on enshrining an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament.

These two events help understand the range of chapters in this collection, but they are not confined by those issues and the introductory Chapter 1 helpfully canvasses the spread of political, legal, constitutional and public and private sector issues relevant to strengthening democracy. The book continues with Chapter 2 by four authors, Nicholas Barry, Narelle Miragiotta, Sarah Murray and Zim Nwokora, examining constitutional conventions as part of the robust constitutional framework needed for a healthy democracy. They argue for the 'democratisation of constitutional conventions, beyond the political classes given the 'contemporary changes in the media landscape' and the 'emergent political polarisation' to be more inclusive of citizens. Chapter 3 by Jill Sheppard on 'Compulsory Voting in an Era of Democratic Disengagement' shares the story of Australia's compulsory voting – compulsory active citizenship since 1924. She examines compulsory voting's impact on other forms of engagement and argues it has led to solidifying the two-party political system which has led to lowering satisfaction with the democratic system. Lachlan Umbers' Chapter 4 examines the experience of early voting in Australia and its impact on the Democratic ideal. Paul Kildea then examines in Chapter 5 the experience of the 2017 plebiscite on same sex marriage to examine whether it was merely advisory or effectively binding on governments, ultimately concluding through his detailed analysis that it was effectively binding.

The next three chapters focus on the Voice Referendum, with Chapter 6 by Ryan Cox, reflecting on the experience as a Non-Indigenous Australian from a philosophical perspective, recognising that ultimately many decisions going forward need to be made by Indigenous Australians. Ron Levy and Justin McCaul's chapter 7 as Non-Indigenous and Indigenous legal scholars highlight how the Voice referendum reflects a 'constitutional legitimacy crisis' as earlier coined by

[3] Kim Rubenstein, 'Power, Control and Citizenship: The Uluru Statement from the Heart as Active Citizenship'. *Bond Law Review*, 30, 2018, p.3

Appleby, Levy and Whalan in 2023 and that going forward managing this crisis requires 'open and inclusive deliberation about constitutional foundations, including about questions of sovereignty.'

Chapter 8 then turns to political scientists exploring the Voice referendum to investigate contemporary Australian civic engagement, comparing the strategies of the 'Yes' and 'No' campaigns and social media's role in shaping the discussion, drawing upon 3.3 million social posts. Their chapter highlights the impactful role of negative messaging in the engagement process. This is an interesting segue for Chapter 9 by Murray Wesson examining Free Speech and its place in political communication, considering Australia's constitutional jurisprudence on the topic. As Wesson explains, the High Court's jurisprudence has sourced the implied freedom of political communication in the sovereignty of the people and as an important factor in fostering and safeguarding civic engagement. The changed composition of the Court has led to some uncertainty on how it will continue to evolve. Wesson concludes the chapter acknowledging that a Federal Human Rights Act would provide a more secure framework for freedom of speech as a means of bolstering civic engagement.

The final three chapters illustrate the diverse ways in which civic engagement in democracy may be analysed. Chapter 10 by Ian Murray and Sarah Murray examines the not-for-profit sector as a third sector in democracy, and the potential role the sector plays in strengthening civic engagement. They argue more attention is needed to strengthen the sector's capacity, advocating for less regulation restricting their activities which has limited the breadth of people involved in these organisations. Ten authors join forces for Chapter 11, bringing their perspectives to the place of Australia's African Diaspora both nationally and internationally in civic engagement. Indeed, it is the mix of the national and international that is distinctive about migrant communities' contributions.

Public policy issues beyond the nation state are also relevant to the final chapter by Joo-Cheong Tham, which examines Australian Democracy and the Climate Crisis. This final chapter uses the crisis to highlight three significant democratic challenges to effective climate action – short-termism, vested interests and self-referencing decision makers. Tham recommends changes including developing a 'democratic planning state', the embrace of a solidaristic ethos and fair and inclusive politics.

This review has merely touched the surface of deeply thoughtful chapters engaging with crucial matters for Australian democracy. Each chapter enables us to take up the challenge of the writers of *Democracy: Eleven writers and leaders on what it is – and why it matters* 'to think emotionally and intellectually about the fragility of democracy'[4] and how important civic engagement is to its continuity.

[4] Atwood et al, *Democracy: Eleven writers and leaders*, 2024.